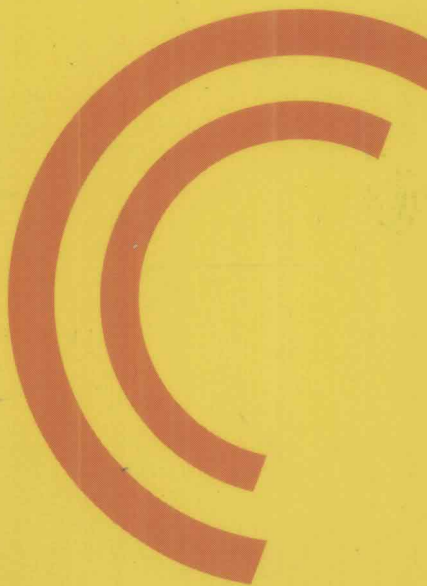
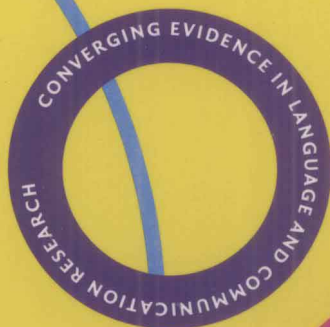


# Thematics

Interdisciplinary Studies

Edited by Max Louwerse and  
Willie van Peer



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## Interdisciplinary Studies

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## Preface

This volume is the answer to a question we asked ourselves a warm summer evening of 1997, when we were brainstorming about thematics and interdisciplinary research. We talked about Sollors' volume (1993) *The return of thematic criticism*<sup>1</sup> and Bremond, Landy & Pavel's *Thematics. New approaches*.<sup>2</sup> In both studies contributors argue for the importance in literary studies, but struggle with the concept of thematics. A question looming in the background of these studies, is an interdisciplinary approach to thematics (see Sollors 1993:xiv), or rather its near-absence. Probably struck by the heat of that summer evening, we decided to pursue the plan of an interdisciplinary study. We contacted friends and colleagues from a range of disciplines, mostly from literary studies, linguistics and psychology, to probe their interest in such an enterprise. The spontaneous response we obtained was so overwhelming that the present volume could be brought together, containing studies from leading scholars in a variety of fields.

Any interdisciplinary study is susceptible to criticism: psychologists may think the study is too much grafted upon literary criticism, the literary scholar may wonder whether the psychological approach is not a simplification of matters, while the linguist wonders whether the notion of narratives and texts is perhaps too broad. While bringing disciplines together, one risks being too general, too broad and too vague. We chose to take these risks, however, because we are convinced that interdisciplinary research answers questions that individual disciplines, each investigating their own areas, cannot find answers to. As Pelikan puts it in *The idea of the university* (1992):<sup>3</sup>

One of the most positive results ... for the scholar and the researcher is that from the interplay of ideas ... will come the analogies and distinctions between disciplines, the definition and comparisons of methodologies, and perhaps above all the illustrations and metaphors from other disciplines that will illumine the subject mater of the scholar's own discipline in a new way. (p. 96).

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1. Pelikan, J. (1992). *The idea of the university. A reexamination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

2. Sollors, W. (1993). *The return of thematic criticism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

3. Bremond, C., Landy, J. and Pavel, T. (1995). *Thematics. New Approaches*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

We are grateful to all contributors for their generous cooperation and for their patience and diligence in helping us to prepare this volume for publication. We would also like to thank John Benjamins Publishing, and the series editors Wilbert Spooren and Marjolijn Verspoor for their trust in this enterprise. Finally, we would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for the useful comments on a draft of the manuscript. Furthermore, we express our thanks to the following for permission to reproduce copyright material: the publisher of *Thematics Reconsidered*, Editions Rodopi B.V., and its editor Frank Trommler (Werner Sollors); Laurence Pollinger Ltd., David Higham Associates, Peters Fraser and Dunlop Group Ltd., and Cambridge University Press (Catherine Emmott) and Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (Georges Roque).

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# Introduction

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Imagine your friend, who writes poetry in his spare time, presents you with his latest poem, which reads as follows:

I love you  
I love you  
I love you  
You do not love me

I need you  
I need you  
I need you  
You need me too.

Now suppose he tells you he does not know how to go on from there and asks you how *you* would continue a third stanza. We do not know about you personally, of course, but we do know that many people in such a situation would produce a stanza like this:<sup>1</sup>

I want you  
I want you  
I want you  
You want me too.

But *why* do people behave in this way? There are millions of ways in which they could continue the poem, but out of this range, only a small selection is made. The reason for this is twofold. First, there is the patterning set up in the first two stanzas that readers apparently have noticed and that they want to continue.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See Van Peer and Theodoridou (2000).

2. This patterning generally goes under the name of 'foregrounding' in literary studies; empirical research demonstrating the effects of foregrounding are Miall and Kuiken (1994) and Van Peer (1986, 1992).

Next there is what we would like to call *thematic inferencing*, the fact that readers construe some coherent picture in their mind of what the lines of the text describe. When psychologists studying the reading process refer to such a picture, they usually mean that a reader forms a mental representation of the agents referred to in the text, their whereabouts, their actions, their thoughts and their emotions, altogether being called a *situation model*. The lexical elements in the poem calls for a reader to read the poem as a love poem, which is exactly what readers do. When Van Peer and Theodoridou (2000) asked the participants in a reading experiment what they thought the poem was 'about,' 78 per cent answered: "about a love relation". When asked who loves who in the text, 41 per cent said "a man a woman", only half of these (20 per cent) said "a woman a man". Out of a multitude of possible personal configurations readers constructed a highly specific situation model, the interpretation of a love poem. But often more is needed than textual information only. This becomes all the more clear when one realizes that the author of the text, Aras Ören, a Turkish-German author, did not write his text as a love poem at all — which is why Van Peer and Theodoridou omitted his name and the title of the poem, "Made in Germany". His text functions in the context of a love/hate relation between Turkish immigrant workers and their host country, Germany. That none of the readers detected this intention and instead interpreted the text as a love poem is surprising only when text processing is viewed as a mechanical bottom up process. Readers apparently construct meaning out of building blocks in a way that involves a creative jump. This is what we mean by *thematic inference*: the readers saw the relation between the "I" and the "you" in the text as a love relation, in spite of the richness of other potential interpretations and even in spite of the author's intention.

This volume deals with the textual elements, the inferences and the processes underlying their construction and maintenance. As the example already illustrates, such inferences are to be found at the crossroads of various processes (linguistic, mental, cultural, literary), so that the study of them must be carried out at the interface of several disciplines: linguistics, psychology, (art) history, literary studies. With only limited discussion between these disciplines, we think the time is ripe for a volume that aims at such interdisciplinary work. The purpose of this volume, therefore, is to bring together distinct recent developments in various disciplines probing the issue of thematic inferencing. The individual chapters deal with thematics from different perspectives, thus providing a panorama of how the 'aboutness' of discourse comes about.

Despite the increasing interest in thematics in recent years, the study of themes remains a daunting task. Sollors (1993:xxiii) calls the study of themes "a minefield without adequate maps", Bremond, Landy and Pavel (1996:6) argue that we should look for "the method thematics so badly needs, one which

acknowledges all the complexities of thematization without letting tear it asunder". Before we can consider maps and methods (let alone the mines), we first need to answer the question what thematics is and what its object of study is. In this introduction we will not try to be exhaustive, but will pave the way for the various contributions that follow by addressing aspects of thematics that we think are of considerable importance.

Although the study of themes can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle (see Sollors, 1993b), modern-day thematics directly goes back to the beginning of the 20th century. In 1925 Boris Tomashevsky published the essay 'Tematika' (Thematics). The essay provides a theoretical analysis of the elements involved in narrative and has been very influential even in today's study of themes. Tomashevsky argues that themes are consistent in literature, because of their general interest for the reader. That is, emotions are attached to a theme, which keep the attention stimulated (see the contributions by Daemmrich, Giora, Hjort and Wolf in this volume). According to Tomashevsky a text as a whole has a theme, built from smaller themes (see also the contributions by Kintsch and Le in this volume). They all have a certain unity and are composed of even smaller thematic elements that are arranged in a definite order. The smallest, irreducible thematic element Tomashevsky calls 'motif'. The combinations of different motifs (like the abduction of a princess, a fight with a dragon, etc.) constitute different themes. To ensure coherence of a text, the introduction of motifs must be justified by motivation (see also Roque's contribution in this volume). The combinations of motifs need to have a particular order. Tomashevsky distinguishes two kinds of arrangement. Thematic elements that are ordered by causal-temporal relationships form stories (narratives, tales, novels), those that are contemporaneous form descriptive texts (official letters, lyrics). The next important distinction Tomashevsky makes is between the story and the plot. The story is the action itself, the plot how the reader learns of the action. In other words, story is the presentation of thematic elements, the plot is the actual causal-temporal ordering of these elements (see the contributions by Graesser, Pomeroy and Craig; Louwerse; Zwaan, Radvansky and Whitten in this volume).

Notwithstanding the influence of his study, Tomashevsky's ideas do not stand alone in their time. In a Positivist tradition many folklorists looked for the classification of narratives and an explanation for the universality of folk tales. For them theme was considered as both the answer to a classification and to the universality of folktales. The problem with many of these studies was that they focused on traditional independent tales (types), rather than the building blocks these tales consist of (motifs). That is, for those tales consisting of one motif, classification was relatively simple. For types with more than one motif, classification turned out to be almost impossible. Particularly Aarne and Thompson

(1928) acknowledged this and worked on a Motif-Index to bring together narrative elements from a wide range of traditional fictional narratives. They argued that types have independent existence, but can contain several motifs. These motifs are the smallest elements of a tale and persist in tradition (see the contribution by Van Peer in this volume). Whereas a type-index was based on a genetic relationship between the tales, a motif-index looked at the similarity between the elements of the tale to determine the identity of a tale. The motif-index looked at logical categories, almost like a library catalogue. Thompson (1946:416) then classified motifs into three classes: actors (e.g. wicked step-mother), objects (e.g. seven-league-boots) and single incidents (e.g. to die next day). It is the last class that often leads an independent existence and can therefore be included in a type-index.

Although Aarne and Thompson moved towards structural features of similar tales, the problem is that their categorization does not have a theoretical basis. The index was conceived to be a practical reference, but trying to classify tales in the Aarne-Thompson index proved problematic. According to Vladimir Propp, a study on the basis of these smallest components of the text is the only correct method of investigation. His *Morphology of the folktale* (1928) has undoubtedly influenced the study of themes most (see the chapters by Graesser and Sollors in this volume), although this only happened after it became disseminated in the West through its translation in 1968. Many of the problems Propp discusses can be directly related to today's state of thematics. In 1928 Propp stated that the study of classifying tales finds itself in a blind alley because of the methods of investigation (1968:4). He argues that an interdisciplinary approach brings the solution to this problem. More specifically, Propp claims that previous classifications with a clear-cut a priori division into which the various tales under investigation are classified, are problematic and even dangerous. For these scholars motifs are the primary building blocks of a tale, whereas the plot is a creative unifying act (Propp, 1968:12). This means that a set of motifs form the constants of a tale, to which variables are added. The problem, however, is to decide what these constants are. Instead of using a deductive approach, where the constants are defined before the actual study of the tales has started, Propp compared the plot of a corpus of tales by abstracting the tale's constant elements from the variables. These constant elements are what Propp calls 'functions', "an act of a character defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (ibid. 21). The advantage of such a method is that the varieties on Aarne and Thompson's paradigmatic plane are reduced by working on a syntagmatic plane. More concretely, many folklorists see a motif like "a dragon kidnaps the tsar's daughter" as a basic narrative unit. Propp, on the other hand, argues that this example can be further decomposed into four elements, which can vary. The dragon can be

replaced by all kinds of villains, the abduction by all kinds of acts of disappearance, the tsar by any powerful ruler, the princess by any kind of victim.

Although it might seem that Aarne and Thompson's empirical methodology conflicts with Propp's more deductive one, it does not. This becomes clear when one ceases to see Propp's work in isolation and instead locates it in its sphere of emergence. Thus, Propp starts his analysis by selecting a corpus of tales from Aarne's classification and his methodology shows similarities with those of others (e.g. Van Gennep, 1912). But Propp was the first theoretician who saw that text analysis should start with a strict methodology of segmentation. Here Propp's and Thompson's aims and objectives are fundamentally different. It could be argued, as Segre (1995:28) has done, that Propp's methodology of comparing the narrated actions in the plot of a tale only works for a homogeneous corpus of tales. Thompson, by contrast, compares heterogeneous tales — modern and old, literary and popular — aiming at a characterization of their structure, in order to identify distinguishing features. Propp's research gave rise to today's text analysis, while Thompson's work is invaluable for research of a comparative and historical nature (Segre, 1995:28).

The folklorist studies of theme revealed that theme consists of smaller elements, often called motifs. Furthermore, they show that the theme of a text can only be found by analyzing its plot and finally, that the theme of a text is not constant, but varies, depending on variations of some constant plots.

In the former Soviet Union Propp's work was mainly considered an exercise in folklore, providing his readers with information on Russian folk tales. In the West, on the other hand, Propp was read for his methodology. He was considered foremost a structuralist and several links with linguistics can be drawn (Jakobson, 1987:89; Liberman, 1993:xxxviii). In fact, it can be argued that Propp's structuralism informed literature, art and linguistics, and the other way around. It is therefore not surprising that at the sentence level too the question of theme came about. In the 1920s, for instance, linguists of the Prague School introduced the distinction between theme and rheme. Theme is the given information, used by the speaker to either introduce or maintain a particular topic. The rheme, on the other hand, is the new information, that is, the expression containing the information the speaker wishes to communicate with respect to the topic at hand (see also the contributions by Le and Gernsbacher and Robertson in this volume). The theme of a clause, has also been referred to as psychological subject. In the 19th century linguists were concerned with the order in which expressions of a clause are processed in the mind of the speaker. The cognitive point of departure was the psychological subject, or the theme. This notion of theme is related to the one in Functional Grammar. The theme of a clause is "that which is the concern of the message", "what the speaker had in his mind to start with, when embarking on the production of the clause" (Halliday, 1985:31). The theme of the clause is selected by the

speaker to ground what is going to be said, the point of departure. But contrary to the Prague School, Halliday argues that the theme is the initial position of the clause. According to Halliday it is the information-structure rather than the thematic structure that determines whether something is given or new. In other words, the theme as starting-point is speaker-oriented, the semantically important information is the rheme.

In English and many West European languages the grammatical subject and the psychological subject (the theme) are often identical, at least for declarative (statement-type) sentences. But is there any relation between grammatical subject assignment and the theme of a text and the theme of a clause? This was examined by Kim (1993) in a study on the effects of global and local themes on syntactic subject assignment. Kim defined the *local theme* as the most salient character in a picture and the *global theme* as the proposition the narrative is about, characterized by the title of the story or the person associated with the title. In several experiments subjects looked at a series of pictures, which together formed a story. After having read the title aloud, they were asked to tell a story corresponding to the events shown in the pictures and matching the title of the story. Kim predicted that subjects choose syntactic subjects according to the referent in the global theme (*global theme*) according to the salient person in a picture (*local theme*), or according to the syntactic subject they expressed in the previous clause (*previous syntactic subject*). She found clear evidence for an interaction of all three factors — previous subject, local theme and global theme — contributing to the selection of the syntactic subject in the production of a story, with local theme most consistent and powerful. More interestingly, Kim found that the three factors each have their particular functions. The global theme appeared to be strongest in the introduction, climax and conclusion of the story. Furthermore, it had a significant effect in psychological clauses, i.e. those clauses expressing a character's psychological state or a speaker's evaluation. The local theme, however, was significant in event clauses, i.e., those clauses describing the actual events expressed in the picture. The previous syntactic subject, finally, provided local coherence across the clauses. In the production of text, language users thus apply both global and local themes to make the text globally and locally coherent. Although the 'global theme' is what we usually consider the 'theme' of a text, its interaction with local themes is of great importance for a full understanding (see the discussion of Tomashevsky's work and the contributions by Emmott and Louwerse in this volume).

Kim's finding that the global theme particularly featured in the introduction, climax and conclusion of a story brings us back to the plot of a narrative. Narrative texts are apparently structured according to the theme of the text. The idea of such general thematic structure was extremely popular in the 1970s with several

proposals for story grammars. Well known are Van Dijk's (1972) study in which he proposed a text grammar, and Rumelhart's (1977) story grammars. The idea of these grammars is that, similar to sentences, narratives can be parsed into text units that are related to each other by a set of relations (e.g. causal or temporal relations). More recently Shen (1985, 1988) proposed a story grammar that is fully based on the linguistic X-Bar theory. Shen argues that any story has at least the structure Problem, Try and Outcome, each eventually embedding more of these categories. Those categories higher in the hierarchy of the story grammar form the aboutness of the text. Some even presented a computational model for story grammars (see the contribution by Meister in this volume).

There are several problems with story grammars though (see Garnham, 1983). First of all, contrary to sentences, there is no definite set of syntactic items. The number of different events, for example, seems infinite, which makes a knowledge base containing these events unlikely. Related to this, determining to which category of the story grammar a text unit belongs is difficult. Nevertheless, despite the fact that studies of story grammar are less common nowadays than they once were, they provide an insight into the structure of text and hence in the construction of themes. That is, although the link between sentence grammars and story grammars is problematic, the notion of story grammar is useful for text analysis (see the contribution by Shen in this volume).

The structures generated by story grammars are similar to Propp's sequence of functions. In fact, Propp's functions show considerable similarities with actions, or propositions, as they are used by Van Dijk (1972:287), Kintsch and Van Dijk (1978) and Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983). According to them, two main levels can be distinguished in text analysis, a microstructural and a macrostructural level. The microstructure is the local structure of the text, the sentence- and sequence structure supplemented with information from background knowledge. The macrostructure is the global structure of the text, a hierarchically ordered net of propositions. The theme of a text is (a part of) its macrostructure that is formed by four macrorules: (1) deletion of irrelevant and unrelated information, (2) selection of the most relevant and related information, (3) generalization of selected propositions, (4) construction or integration of propositions. With these macrorules it is possible to describe how readers get to the theme of a text, that is, how they construct its abstracted macroproposition. This text analysis can be translated in a model of text comprehension, in which meaningful text units are transformed into propositions, the situations expressed in the clauses of the text. These are ordered in a coherent text base, the microstructure of the text. If a proposition shares one or more arguments with the proposition in the text base, it is included in the text base. In addition, inferential processes are eventually initiated to organize the textbase. The distinction between the textbase and the situation model is orthogo-



nal to the micro- and macrostructure distinction, with both the text base and the situation model having a micro- and a macrostructure (Kintsch, 1998:166).

As with story grammars, the bottleneck in the studies by Kintsch and Van Dijk is the construction of text units — propositions, clauses, sentences, functions. Furthermore, because of the construction of text units, the size of texts under investigation is limited. Recently, a solution for these problems is found in Latent Semantic Analysis (see the contribution by Kintsch in this volume). LSA records which words occur in the same textual context. By looking at co-occurrences of a word it constructs a vector of numbers, indicating the strength of a concept to another concept. LSA takes into account both the paradigmatic axis (selection of these units) and — to some extent — the syntagmatic axis of the language function. Although we have seen that both recurrent motifs and their plot play a crucial role in thematics, thematic analyses can even bring interesting results by only looking at recurrences. Word frequency, for instance, can tell us a lot about the theme of the text (shown in the contributions by Fortier, Hogenraad and Martindale and West in this volume). Throughout the years many word frequency programs have been developed, like Martindale's *Alexis* (see this volume) and Hogenraad's *Protan* (see this volume).

Van Dijk and Kintsch's notions of microstructure, macrostructure, text base and situational model have had a strong influence on disciplines like psychology and linguistics. As mentioned earlier, the chapter by Le proposes a linguistic model of text analysis primarily based on Van Dijk and Kintsch's (1983) model. The model formally defines a hierarchy of textual units by showing that at each level, they are composed of a theme and a rheme. Furthermore, Van Dijk and Kintsch's models can also be seen as the basis for theories like Gernsbacher's (1990) Structure Building Framework and Zwaan and Radvansky's (1998) Event-Indexing Model. Although all these models differ from each other, they generally assume four general types of relations between text units: referential, locational, causal and temporal, each corresponding to the who, what, where, why and when of the event described by the text. These sources of coherence or indexes form the cues to construct a coherent mental representation and facilitate the comprehender in keeping track of the theme of the text (see the contribution by Van Oostendorp, Otero, Campanario in this volume). One of these sources of coherence, referential relations, has received most attention in the literature. Emmott (1999, but also her chapter in this volume) investigated the effects of referential coherence in text, and Gernsbacher (1990, but also Gernsbacher and Robertson in this volume) looked at the effect of referential coherence in comprehension and found that — like the other types of coherence — referential relations facilitate the comprehension process.

In sum, the study of the aboutness of text can be found in a variety of disciplines: folklore studies, psychology, language studies, linguistics, literary studies, and